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Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Nagy, Peter Tibor. 1999. "Teaching History as Teaching of Pluralism." *Information: International Society for History Didactics* 20 (1): 78–86.

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Teaching History as Teaching of Pluralism

Peter Tibor Nagy
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There is a very typical question at the international conferences of history-teaching (and historical thinking) in the last 8 - 9 years. This question is: is an "East-European" paradigm of the history teaching necessary or not? Is it necessary to assimilate to the tendencies of the developed world - practically the "West" - or not. Is it necessary to follow the patterns of European and American textbooks, which concentrated less and less on the political, military, institutional, governmental history, and more and more on the structures, the long tendencies, the history of culture, the history of society, the history of everyday life?

I have to say my opinion is: yes and no.

First I will start with some arguments why the history teaching of the post-communist states need an "absolute assimilitation" to the Euro-American tendencies;
Secondly, I will list some real "yes and no" arguments concerning the teaching of political history;
Thirdly, I will list some arguments of a "no" answer, about a "temporary Central European Paradigm" of history teaching.

1. "Yes"
Some colleagues and experts coming from the ex-communist states say: the history-teaching of these countries did not stress the national interests, national features in the decades of communism.

1.1 The text books writer had to avoid the "national viewpoints" because the international political context in the years of communism forced the textbook writers and sometimes the historians not to speak about the conflictous tradition of the Polish-Russian or Hungarian-Russion historical relations.

The history textbooks had to "create" a historical "prelude" of the existing Warsaw Pact.

It was important to stress the common features and common interests of East European countries in the history. Tsarist Russia - the textbooks accepted a panslavist ideology - became the "big brother" of the Slavic peoples of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. It was not very far from a traditional national interpretation of the Bulgarian and Slovakian historical knowledge - but it was very strange for Polish history, and it was problematic for Czechs too.

For the Hungarians and Romanians - not being Slavic peoples - it was more complicated than for the others. Hungarian textbooks in the 1950s tried to stress the great cultural and social influence of Slavic people in the early centuries of the middle ages in Hungary. On the other hand they described the role of German settlements. The German craftsmen and merchants who were the pioneers of embourgeoisement in this region were called "colonialists" in the textbooks and curriculums.

The "Slavs are good boys" - "Germans are bad boys", and the English and Americans are bad boys too, naturally. For example: as it is well known, in the years of 1919-1922 a proto-fascist system existed in Hungary, and only the pressure of American, British, French governments and capital forced the Hungarian government (which needed the international loans) to change the regime to a conservative parliamentary system. This process was described in the textbooks as "the role of American and the British capital in the consolidation of Horthy *fascism*".

1.2. Not only the "Warsaw pact context" caused problems in the history teaching in the Soviet satellite countries.

The history textbooks had to "create" a historical "prelude" for the existing modern states (with their modern borders), too.

Yugoslavian history teaching stressed the common features of the history of the Yugoslav states and peoples. (As it is well known, one of this states belonged to Austria, another belonged to the Hungarian Kingdom, but was ruled by its own acts, and the others belonged to the Turkish Empire.)

Czechoslovakian history teaching (especially before 1968) stressed "the Czechoslovak history". (It is well known that the Czech kingdom belonged to Austria, Slovakia as territorial unit never existed, and these territories belonged to the Hungarian Kingdom. It was impossible to create a special "Czechoslovakian history" as a specific story.)

Naturally, within the Soviet Union, Estonian or Litvian history teaching had to stress the features common to the Russian Empire.

So "national independent" histories of these countries belonged to the values which were "confiscated" by the Soviets, by "the communists".

The building of the "East European common history", the "building of Yugoslav, Czechoslovakian, Soviet patriotism" made the middle class, the intellectuals, the historians so angry that they very openly supported a real nationalistic conception of interpretation of history.

1.3. Communist power irritated these "small nation national feelings" not only because of the "internationalism" of communism, but because of the *nationalism* of some communist governments and educationalists.

Ruling communist parties of the Stalinist type consciously used nationalist and patriotic ideology as a means of underpinning their power. This phenomenon is documented in the states' national curricula right up to end of the communist era in the region. For instance, Stalin (himself a Georgian, paradoxically), clearly used traditional Russian nationalism and anti-semitism in his fight against Trotsky and Zinoviev. "Anti-Zionism" - as the anti-Jewish discrimination (for example the university "numerus clausus") was officially called - was a key element expressed in Soviet ideology not only in the Stalinist period, but all the time, until Gorbachev came into power. Stalinism used Russian patriotism and the Orthodox religious tradition consciously when extending Russia as the Soviet empire. Expecially during World War II patriotism was used as ideology by the Red Army in the war occupying North-East Finnland

and the Baltic states, and later in its fight against the German invasion.

At the end of 1980s the legitimation crisis of the communist regimes was followed by increasingly stronger nationalism in all countries of the region. In East Germany a cult of the Prussian king, Friedrich the Great, became official ideology.

The state-generated conflicts between major Romanian populations and Hungarian minorities as well as the major Bulgarian population and Turkish minorities, became significant in Romania und Bulgaria.

The authorities not only hindered the regional-municipal autonomies of those minorities, but the cultural freedom such as the schooling and book-publishing too.

Not only the Stalinist-type politicians, but the reform-communists as well used nationalism as a tool in their struggle for political power legitimacy. In the 1980s one wing of the Hungarian reform-communists followed this policy too. This wing of communist party was led by Pozsgai, one of the founders of the "Hungarian Democratic Forum", the right wing nationalist and anti-communist governing party of the period of 1990/1994. This communist politicians very often argued like a nationalist politician. In 1988-1989 they formed a compromise with the nationalist opposition of the communist regime for two reasons: to exclude the Stalinists and the liberals. In other countries the ex-communist politicians as Milosevic or Meciar in the mid 90s stood clearly on the nationalist side of the political scenes of Serbia and Slovakia.

The history textbooks mirrored this situation.

Comparing the pictures illustrating the image of "The Capitalist", in textbooks for Soviet pupils to the ones found in the Nazi textbooks, they prove to be quite similar. The same similarity is found with the caricatures of the anti-semitic papers of the Central European fascist movements of the 1940s: the Hungarian Arrow Cross or the Romanian Iron Guard. The capitalist a fat and ugly man with "Jewish features", keeping a sack of gold or money, or living any kind of hedonist life-style.

In the Soviet textbooks, patriotism has been the official ideology since the thirties. The widely acknowledged scholarly conception of Nordic influence on early Russian history became prohibited. For the Soviet Union of Stalin the specific Russian cultural heritage was the important value pattern. In the Soviet Union and in the satellite countries Marx's famous pamphlet, "The Secret Diplomacy of the XVIIIth Century" was not published until the late 1980s, because Marx's topic was the dangers of Russian expansion. Russian colonialisation in Asia was called as "civilisation" by the textbooks, which described the British and French colonialisation as a real hell. In the 1960s, when textbook agreements were signed between Hungary and the Soviet Union, the Soviets asked the Hungarians to delete Russia from the list of imperialist powers in the Hungarian history textbooks.

Another example is Poland, where the Jaruselski government deliberately avoided appearing as a communist government, based on the power of the working class, but took great care to position itself as a national government, overall aim of which was to save the nation from internal chaos in 1980, and (naturally without expressing it as an open message) to save Poland

from possible Russian and East German military attack. The Jaruselski regime built "a cult" of Marshal Pilsudski of the 1920s, indicating the parallelism with the role of the Army in the 1920s, and the 1980s.

The officially published textbooks of history stressed the Polish national feeling very intensively and stressed the role of the Polish revolutions and revolutionaries.

As one can see, not only Soviet but also the Central European Communist regimes used nationalism as legitimising ideology, especially in history teaching and formation of historical knowledge in the state-commissioned films and architectural products.

In Romanian and Bulgarian textbooks the history of these countries was described as being of more than thousand years old. Among scholars the validity of this sort of history writing has been debated and disputed as fairly romantic and mythical. However, this glorification of the country's past was declared official truth, not only in the fifties, but also more recently. The continuous history of the Dacoroman State of the 2nd century to the Romania of the 19th century or the "1300 year old Great Bulgaria" was officially declared and propagated ideology, and couterarguments were prohibited more or less.

In the Hungarian textbooks expecially in the fiftieth, the Habsburgs and the modernisation of the 18th century against the particularist Hungarian nobility were accused of Germanisation.

All the described textbooks declared themselves as being Marxist. However, from an historical and literary point of view, they often neglected the classical viewpoints of Marxism. They were not interested in what was "progressive" and what was not from a social viewpoint, from the viewpoint of embourgoisement or human rights. For example in the interpretation of the revolutions of 1848 or 1918 the actors of history were "good boys or bad boys" only with respect to national interests.

Because of the above mentioned three phenomena - the influence of legitimisation of Warsaw Pact, the influence of legitimisation of new states and new borders, the interest of legitimatisation of nationalist argumentation of communist parties - the renewal of history teaching in Central Europe was a kind of national awaking after 1990. More national history, more facts, more names, more battles - we can describe the history of history-teaching of the last ten years with these words. A lot of Central and East European historians think that this is the speciality in which the Eastern history-teaching should be different from the Western one.

I think so: but they are not right.

If we speak too much about the national political elements of Croatian, Hungarian, Serb, Slovenian, Slovakian, Czech, Polish etc. history we will miss the dimensions of the real history.

In the "political" reality, the political debates about the fate of one or other little country or nation is interpretable only on the basis of its relation to the history of Habsburg Empire, the German Empire, the Russian Empire, or the Turkish Empire. The Hungarian 1848 (as political or military history (is interpretable only as the part of the crisis of the Habsburg Empire, the crisis of the Europe of Vienna peace treaty, and as an illustration of the new political coalition

of the Habsburgs and the Romanovs.

The Romanian 1861 is interpretable as the part of the crisis of the Turkish empire, the Estonian 1940 is interpretable as the part of German-Soviet relations.

For myself (coming personally from a smaller country) I have to say: the "untold stories of the national histories" are only important if they make the great tendencies clearer. Every new national political element which is not interpreted as an element of world history will be a useless fact in the textbooks.

The equality of the "big nations and small nations" is a beautiful ideology, but the history of Europe and the history of the world is only a "Moloch of Facts" if we try to describe the separated stories all of the little nations. But if we describe the great tendencies, we can speak about the little nations, and our little national history among them.

So I think the wider teaching of "untold stories of national independence" is not necessary and not useful to create citizens of the European Union. In this sense the answer is "yes": the new democracies of Central and East Europe have to follow the "mainstream", when the West-European and American textbooks select the particular facts of the national histories.

We have to teach less national history, and more about regional, European, and global questions.

2. "Yes and No"

Not only the international context - the Warsaw Pact, neu states, new nationalism - forced the textbook writers to manipulate textbooks from the 50s to the 80s, but naturally the local (national level) ideological and political context. So the local (national level) contexts give questions for the historians and educationalists about the new spirit of history teaching now, too.

2.1. First of all it is well known that every communist country had a one-textbook-system. That means that although there were debates among historians about different historical questions, only one opinion was "official": the party and ministry let only one opinion be published in the textbooks.

The new possibility that every professional group has the possibility to publish its "own" textbook became a huge attraction after 1990.

The textbook is a natural place for spreading different historical interpretations. The historians, after so many decades, have a right to go out from the ivory tower and explain their debates to the people.

The people - after so many decades - have a right to understand the *different* interpretations about their past.

The textbooks are sometimes full of facts, sometimes full of political stories. These questions are debated by historians, and the historians communicate to the society by the textbooks, too.

2.2. Some questions in the textbooks of communist times were declared non-scientific monopolies, caused by direct political reasons.

The East German textbooks could not face the German past, because - in the textbooks - the antifascist German workers' movement became the dominant factor of modern German history.

The Czechoslovakian textbooks could not show a real picture about Masaryk and Beneš and their democratic state, because the communists in 1948 made a coup against this political regime, and they needed a political legitimation of this coup.

The Hungarian textbooks could not describe the importance and realities of 1956, because of the person of Kadar. (In a lot of ways the Hungarian textbooks of the seventies and the eighties were the most objective among the East European textbooks, but the interpretation of 1956 is an exception.)

In the process of the changing of the regime, it became very important that the new generation, the "generation of democracy", should understand the basic facts of these untold stories. The persons, facts, dates, places of the untold stories of the revolution of 1956 in Budapest or of 1944 in Warsaw were built into the national cultural canon.

2.3. Some history textbooks - I can cite some good examples of the textbook history of Hungary of the early 1990s - present a real political question. When these books interpret the history of embourgeoisement, the Second World War, the Holocaust, or the communist period, the work as real political media.

The different opinions about the 20th century Hungarian history mirror not only different professional-scientific cleavages, but more widely ideological cleavages and sometimes party-political cleavages too.

Ideological and political groups attack a textbook which "belongs" to another ideological and political group with the argumentation that one or another political fact is *not* mentioned in the book, "a fact which would have changed the whole picture of the historical phenomena". To avoid these attacks, the textbook writers write a lot of political facts, and chronological data into the textbooks, which make these textbooks more objective bus less learnable, and less modern, less siminlar to the western patterns.

These three phenomena force me to say: "yes and no". I, as a history teacher, think that a better selection of the facts and dates would be better for history teaching. But as a historian, and as a citizen I think: these societies need these debates, as the element of pluralism in every day life and in the symbolic sphere. The pluralist debates, if they want to be really intellectual and not only the "battle of tribes", need facts - perhaps more facts than would be necessary from a pedagogical viewpoint.

3. "No"

In a lot of post-communist states (similarly to the western states) you can find a school subject whose name is "citizenship" or "democratic citizenship" or "legal knowledge of citizens". There are a lot of deep problems with the effectiveness of the teaching of these subjects. The

institution of democracy is too young and weak, and sometimes the real working of these institutions (parliament, the legal system, administration, human rights) are very far from the letter of the law.

The recent years, new democracies could not offer enough examples which would be the material of an explanation of one or another constitutional principal. Or, the pupils, the parents, the teachers are involved emotionally, so the explanation with the examples of the 1990's are not possible and not useful at all.

There is only one solution to explain the reality of rights, laws, governing etc.: the connection of these things to the history. All of the modern constitutional institutions and principals were born sometime in history: the greatest part of them was a working reality during the 18th to the 20th century in the USA and Western Europe.

It is necessary to teach more about the constitutional institutions and principals of the USA and Western Europe and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. That is the only way that the pupils can realise what these institutions and principals meant and mean, how they worked and work, functioned and function.

I think that in the special situation of post-communist countries, in the process of building of democracies, in this moment the teaching of democracy as it existed and worked in history is more important, than to teach life-styles, social history, and culture.

Perhaps it is important to tell the pupils, how a family lived in the 19th and 20th century, but in East Europe we have to say also what rights were guaranted for women, and how divorce and the birth-control became basic human rights.

It is important to tell the pupils how the workers and merchants worked in their everyday lives - but in East Europe we have to say, what were the constitutional guaranties of the freedom to work and the freedom to do business.

It is important to tell the pupils, how a colourful world was offered by the different religions, but in East Europe we have to say also what the guaranties of the freedom of religions, and the separation of church and state were, how the process of secularisation has developed.

I hope after 20 or 30 years democracy and human rights will be a natural experience for East European children, too. In that situation it will not be necessary to teach these things as historical facts and processes. Until then: it is, and it will be the job of historians and history teachers.

Sources:

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